RELIGION OR GOSPEL
John 2:13-22
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We expect to pay as we go in this world and sometimes it turns out that the very best moments are moments of grace. We live life-on-the-run and plot each hour of each day in order to get it all accomplished, and sometimes the very best moments are the unexpected interruptions. In this suicidal style we inflict on ourselves, sprinting from one engagement to the next, beauty is often a serendipitous accident that grabs us by the scruff of the neck and forces us to listen to a Bach Chorale; to submit to the colors of a sunset or the icy crystal of a winter sky; to receive the embrace of a child or the touch of compassion from a caring friend. The very best moments are moments of grace. One evening last week I was standing in the lobby of a school, having dispensed with parental duty by attending a concert. We had to hurry to get there: I had work to do, calls to make, this sermon to outline. And in the midst of my self-inflicted anxiety grace made an appearance. From across the room it came: an eight year old yelling, "Mr. B., Mr. B., I haven't seen you for a long time!"punctuated by a wonderfully enthusiastic hug around the mid-section, as if we were long lost friends, which we are, in a way. Mary and I have spent a few hours on the beach together but I haven't seen her much since last summer. She bears the burden of our friendship. For some reason I'm not sure I understand, I am important to her. And I left the lobby cleansed of frustration, a little more at peace, having experienced a very special moment, because grace had happened.

Grace is the distinctive Christian word. It is the only word we really know. Preachers have to remind themselves constantly that the language of theology is a foreign language for most of the people to whom we are addressing our pulpit gems. For one reason or another most of the words we love to use are empty. "Redemption, sanctification, incarnation, atonement" - we log a lot of pulpit time simply defining terms. It is true, as well, for our distinctive word. Grace: we use it to describe the charm of the hostess, the skill of the ballerina, the coordination of the athlete, the humility of the defeated candidate: and, we Christians submit, it is the best word to describe God and His relationship with us.

The classical definition, one more time, sounds something like this. Grace is the overwhelming generosity of God which we have no reason to expect. It is the totally unmerited, undeserved love of God which He extends to us in spite of who or what we are. The most helpful definition I know uses the metaphor of the school-room. Ordinarily the teacher is the judge. The student is the performer. The goal is for the student to earn the approval of the teacher in the form of a good grade. Grace is when the teacher walks into the classroom on the first day of school and says to the students: "I have already given you a grade. Each of you has an A in this course. Now let's get down to the business of learning the subject."

Religion, notoriously, has trouble with the idea of grace. One of the deepest of human needs is to find acceptance from something, someone other than self. The role of religion in the history of the human race is to be the vehicle for persuading God to be accepting and benevolent. Its forms range from a rain dance, to a sacrifice for fertility, to the prayers of the devout for the forgiveness of sins. Behind it all is the assumption that God may be persuaded to love us. The stakes are very high, obviously. And once the assumption is made that people can persuade God to do what they want Him to do, religion becomes a very powerful phenomenon. When the stakes are ultimate, the eternal destiny of the soul for

instance, people are inclined to work at religion rather feverishly, and to do what their religious authorities tell them to do. Those people have a good thing going: power, authority, esteem, respect, wealth sometimes. They come, inevitably, to have a terribly personal interest in the institutional structures of religion. It is in their interests to keep alive the notion that they own, not only the keys to the kingdom, but the knowledge and the whereabouts to open the door. The worst thing one can suggest to a professional religionist is that the product he is selling is as free as the air.

The Old Testament tells the story of the faith of a people constantly trying to become a religion. It begins with an act of grace. God takes the initiative and selects a people, and leads them out of their bondage and gives them a land. Their laws and customs and rituals were the way they were to respond to this incredible graciousness of God. Of one thing they are sure, and that is that God will be faithful in His grace. He will not forget them, He cannot stay angry with them for long, even when they break the laws and neglect the customs, He keeps on loving them, and by that grace winning them back. That grace note may be heard throughout the literature of these people. Psalm 139 expresses amazement at the way this God pursues His people in love even when they are fleeing from Him.

But slowly, relentlessly, the laws and rituals and customs become the way to earn it - rather than the way to respond to it. Slowly, relentlessly the law multiplies and instead of serving as the way a man can live out his gratitude for God's graciousness, it becomes the means by which God may be persuaded to be gracious. Occasionally men rise up in Israel to remind people of grace and inevitably become the enemies of religion. Thus Hosea: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offering." And Amos, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them... But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." God, according to the prophets, didn't care much about the formalities of religion - particularly those formalities which were designed simply to make people feel good about themselves. What He wanted was religion that was honest and authentic and which was expressed in justice and compassion and love in the middle of life. The Old Testament is the story of the tension between Gospel - the news of God's graciousness, and the religion it spawned. And no where is that tension as eloquently described as in the New Testament Lesson this morning.

It is not, by the way, a very soothing passage. Those who prefer their religion comfortable and insipid, and their Lord gentle and mild, had best avoid the second chapter of John.

In the Fourth Gospel Jesus travels to Jerusalem at the beginning of His ministry. We know the end of the story so we know that He will come again, later, to die. For now, it is an initial visit: a trip to the Temple, the very citadel of His people's religion. Historians have been able to piece together what He saw there.

Every adult male Jew was required to pay an annual Temple Tax of half a shekel - the equivalent of two days' wages.

When a man came to the Temple with his tax in hand he entered through a series of courtyards - the first of which was the Court of the Gentiles, open to people

of all nations. It was here that the tax was paid at booths constructed for that purpose. But what he had in his hand in all probability was a Roman Denarli or a Greek Drachma, both of which bore the likeness of an emperor - a "graven image", that is to say. And so there were other booths at which he could exchange his money into Jewish coins for a small service charge.

In all probability the man who came to Jerusalem to pay his tax would also wish to visit the Temple and to worship there, which meant making a sacrifice. If he brought along a lamb, or bullock or a pair of pigeons for that purpose they had to be inspected to assure that they were without blemish for another fee. If he had brought none, however, he could move on to the next booths and purchase a pre-inspected sacrificial animal: lambs and oxen for the wealthy, pigeons for the poor.

It must have looked and sounded like the Ohio State Fair on a busy day. As usual, the people who got hurt by it all were the poor, the ones who couldn't afford to buy a lamb to eat let alone slaughter sacrificially. As a result of this system the religious institution, The Temple, was immensely wealthy: so wealthy in fact that Roman officials often turned to the High Priest to finance a pet public works project.

But worst of all it was this - this whole tawdry exploitive, commercial bazaar - that was stamped indelibly in the peoples' minds as religion. This is what had become of the faith of Abraham and Isaac and the people wandering through the wilderness. The God of Psalm 139 whose love chased His people with divine persistence looks like a potentate whose friendship is for sale to the highest bidder. Here, in its very worst sense, is what religion can become.

Sometimes faith picks a fight. Sometimes integrity gets very angry. Jesus didn't like what He saw, and with cold intentionality made a whip, turned over the tables of the profiteers, knocking coins all over the place, and physically ejected the livestock salesmen from the court.

That story has always made me nervous. If we didn't already know it, it is a not very subtle reminder that there is a fine line between responsible churchmanship and making the church an end in itself: a reminder that the conflict between Jesus and institutional religion is at the heart of the Gospel story; that religious leaders plotted His arrest and engineered His trial and finally browbeat the Romans into executing Him as a trouble maker. It is a reminder that grace is a very fragile idea in the hands of religious people.

— Stormy fellow here

We live in a very religious culture. Church historians like Martin Marty suggest that we are among the most religious people who have ever lived: that part of the uniqueness of American culture is an opaque pietism the sociologists are calling Civil Religion. We baptize every public event with pious gestures and season public utterances with religious allusions. People who don't set foot in a church or haven't opened a Bible in twenty years become irate at the elimination of the gesture in public education. Belief in God is big business: insipid religious literature and movies are very profitable.

C.S.Lewis wrote a barbed response to the amorphous interest in religion in general: "...religious people - that is, people when they are being religious, are not interested in religion. Men who have gods worship those gods: it is the spectators who describe themselves as interested in religion." (Punch 7/9/65, in Marty, The New Shape of American Religion.)

Christianity is not, and never has been, a religion among other religions. It is the way we respond to God's graciousness. It is a life lived out of profound gratitude. It establishes institutions for nurture and stimulation, for the sake of announcing the Good News in the world, and as a place for God to be thanked regularly. But the moment its institutions become ends in themselves it has become religion and stopped being Christianity.

Roger Smith said that well in an editorial: "Christianity as a faith is always in conflict with Christianity as a religion and there is an important sense in which Christian Faith includes within itself the permanent protest against its own religious forms and expressions." (The McCormick Quarterly, 11/64).

Christianity which becomes too religious loses its saltiness. It can no longer fight because it has to protect its investments. It can no longer be a fly in the establishment's ointment as its Lord was because it has to pay its bills like everyone else. Again C.S.Lewis, in the Screwtape Letters diagnosed brilliantly. Somewhere in that delightful satire the devil instructs his nephew to get his victim - who has become a Christian - into a church and involved in a trivial religious dispute. It is the best way to cure him of the Gospel!

Opponents of the church, or those who fancy themselves religious without bothering with the institutional church cannot be comforted much by this incident either.

Jesus was not ideologically opposed to the Temple. In fact He was a faithful practitioner of His religion. It makes no sense at all to talk about Christianity apart from the church. But it seems to me imperative that people who care about the church take this incident very seriously. At its best the church knows that it is a means not an end: that it must preserve and protect the Gospel and not itself: that it lives for the sake of its Lord and the world He loved: that any power and authority it accrues is valid only as it is put to work loving, healing, teaching, reconciling.

The problem, finally, is not institutional but personal. The problem is that we have learned enough times and now believe profoundly that "there is no such thing as a free lunch": that successful life is a tough negotiation; that having one's own back scratched really does depend on scratching other backs. We even structure our social relationships in the same "pay as you go" basis. An invitation requires an invitation in return. A gift obligates the recipient to reciprocate. And beneath it all, under wraps but only slightly is something called pride - or sin. Princeton's Seward Hiltner writes: "Even with a good and needed gift, the power of the other to give it reminds us of our own dependency." Oscar Wilde once observed about a certain man that "he did not understand why the man hated him so because he, Wilde, had never done anything for the man."

We are reasonable, rational people, accustomed to earning our own way. Theologically we expect the same reasonability from our God. We would like very much to earn what we get, and after we have it to feel that we deserved it. And so grace, the very idea of grace, assaults us at a vulnerable point. The late Karl Barth wrote eloquently: "We dislike hearing that we are saved by grace. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from His goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." (Deliverance to the Captives, p.40).

We would prefer to negotiate our way through life. Yet we know, and are still learning that the best moments in life are the moments of grace: the unexpected gift, the surprise of love, the intrusion of undeserved beauty.

We would prefer to negotiate religiously. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is Good News. God's acceptance of us - has been given. God's forgiveness - has been extended. God's love - has been poured out in the life of Jesus Christ our Lord. We are accepted - we are forgiven - we are loved. We are saved, not by our religion, but by the grace of God.

Whatever will become of our religion if that is true? May I submit that it will become authentic, and alive and real!! Confession, for instance, is no longer an act of pious bargaining, but a joyful affirmation of a fact of which we are certain, namely our forgiveness: hymns become a way to express a gratitude too large for words alone: offerings are not religious dues but gratitude taking shape: going to church becomes an act of profound celebration: we have been given that which we most deeply need - the love and acceptance of our God. Christianity is no longer what we must do to persuade God to love us - but the way we choose to thank Him for the love He has already given.

What about religion? I love Karl Barth's simple but immensely suggestive analysis and I commend it to you: "We are left with the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts."

Amen.

O God, even when we cannot and will not understand, give us grateful hearts. Open us, again, in this Lenten season, to your grace: give us again the peace that passes all understanding. And call out of us new faith, new gratitude, new joy: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.